

State of Wisconsin
Department of Natural Resources

Waste Management Program Focus Group
Series
July of 2004

Facilitator Summary Report and Analysis

Submitted by:

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DISCLAIMER:

In editing the session reports I have removed without acknowledgement any statements that might be construed as “hearsay,” sometimes characterized as “he said she said” statements as well as anything that constitutes “finger pointing’ or blame.

The brainstorming listings and rank orderings are not intended to reflect any scientifically verifiable result or generalized truth. They indicate a fairly hastily, albeit thorough, bringing together of collective thought in that moment by those who participated.

In This Summary Report and Analysis I have used only items from the Brainstorming Exercises in the full reports that received three or more dots in group ranking exercises.

This Summary Report provides the reader with a set of themes that I have identified as having critical importance to creating a vital and healthy re-design of the Waste Management Program. The reader is encouraged to become actively engaged in reviewing this report by taking the actions suggested here.

ACTION:

- **Review the Summary Report below**, as well as the full reports from each of the sessions. Also review the participant thoughts submitted by email and included in the appendix. **Pay special attention to the themes.** Use a highlighter and **mark text that resonates for you.**
- Ask yourself this question: “What one or two themes from among those listed in this summary report and others from the full report and the appendix which, if we worked **ON** them diligently and did them well, would help everything else we’re trying to do have a better chance of success?”
- **Think about that.**
- **Management is encouraged to create an opportunity for engaging a dialogue, with everyone in the same room at the same time;** Staff, Managers, and Senior Administrators. Follow a process for collaboratively deciding which one, two or possibly three things, if done well, can be strategically leveraged for outcomes of greatest success in all other areas.
- Know that as you undertake such an endeavor, and while you are engaged in it, **unexpected benefits will begin to happen** in many areas of the Waste Management Program.
- Do not stop everything you are doing. **Engage in a practical, parallel process** that will give you lateral support for your more technical and day-to-day efforts.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE; Grounding the Focus Group process:

The root cause of successful change process: Dignity, respect, trust and kept promises *(Adapted from Appreciative Inquiry “Dream” statement)*

“It’s difficult to change any complex system. It’s even harder to change attitude, and it is more important (to change attitude than anything else.)
How do you make change in a complex system? Focus on outcomes (not issues) and work with short-term goals.” (Mission Improbable, by Clark Lee)

“How can we learn not only about technique, but about value; how can we change our minds about what is important, change our understanding and appreciation of what matters, and, more, change our practical sense about what we can do together?” ... *(The Deliberative Practitioner by John Forester)*

THE APPROACH, Appreciative Inquiry:

As I undertook pre-focus group inquiry into this initiative it became clear to me that the framing questions as presented were not conducive to encouraging a positive frame of mind about all of this.

If we want to move an organizational culture to a more positive level, it is important that we examine how we ask questions. To that end I drew on the fundamentals of the Appreciative Inquiry process to articulate a set of positive questions using the basic language of: “What are your hopes and wishes for a healthy and vital re-design of the Waste Management Program ...?”

Please see “Questions as Originally framed and as framed by Appreciative Inquiry Principles” in the appendix.

While I always received and honored the urge on the part of participants in the Focus Groups to vent their frustration and anger, I also gently, but firmly, guided them into an exercise of addressing the positive inquiry by asking **“What are your hopes and wishes for a vital and healthy Waste Management Program Re-design initiative and product.”**

This approach succeeded, I think, in helping to elucidate a real desire for an improved culture of cooperation, trust, equity, respect, and honesty within the program. It propelled the participants to think about what they agreed will work rather than putting them into the spin of disagreeing about what will or will not work.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO WORK ON?

What is that thing, which, if you do it well and skillfully, it will position everything else you try to do for a higher chance of success? Conversely, what is that thing, which, if you do not address it skillfully, you will increase the risk of failure in everything else you try to do?

As you review the various elements of this report you will begin to understand, I think, that the re-design initiative requires an adjustment as to what is really important.

I am reminded of a bit of advice from the business world: “It is important that you spend more time **ON** your business than **IN** your business.

If you are going to make real improvements, there are several areas that everyone involved will undertake more productively if they start working **ON** such things as **language, trust, core values, equity, personal responsibility and more.**

It will not suffice for the people involved to simply say, 'we must build trust.' for example. It will require learning together about how trust is created and maintained in an organization. Without a shared understanding of what constitutes trust it will be very difficult to build it.

LANGUAGE:

“Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with.”

(William Wordsworth)

Throughout this facilitation I have been struck by a kind of disassociative language used by participants.

In response to questions regarding hopes and wishes **so many of the statements in both staff focus groups used the word ‘would,’** a passive verb, where **‘will,’** the *active* verb, best provides the strength of intention and accountability for the statement.,

Similarly, **many statements in both staff and manager focus groups did not use pronouns such as ‘I’ or ‘we’** when making their Hopes and Wishes statements. This indicates that the individual speaking is not taking responsibility for the hope/wish intention.

It is important to recognize that I did not ask people to respond in any particular way except to indicate their Hopes and Wishes. This is to say; I could have requested that participants use pronouns and active verbs, possibly ‘training’ them in the moment to understand the importance of being assertive and taking responsibility.

Some examples:

A. “Redesign ... (will) result in a bottom-up rather than a top-down program management system.” [The three dots in this sentence represent the word ‘would.’ The parentheses around the ‘will’ represent the insertion of that word.

B. “(We will) develop a consistent structured approach for complaint investigation.” [The parentheses here represent my edit to add the pronoun ‘We’ and the active verb ‘will’ to a sentence that did not acknowledge accountability for the wish nor include an active verb indicating the intention to **make** it happen.]

Language is one of the elements that create “reality.” (See Assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry in the appendix.) If we use passive verbs and do not use pronouns, we create the “reality” that this **could** happen; and **if** it happens, it will not be because anyone is accountable for it to happen. This does not constitute a healthy reality!

So much of the language in the first draft of the report (and particularly among staff) is the language of the victim without accountability. This cannot contribute to a healthy program let alone a redesign process.

Conversely, the language I read from reports of processes in 2001 about the work and efficacy of teams in the Air and Waste Management Programs was dominated by “needs” and “Shoulds.”

These words operate antithetically to the concept of “Teams.” Teams do not undertake their own work or the work of others in terms of what **“we need”** and what **“you should do.”** Teams work collaboratively to identify what they **have** and then collaboratively identify what they **can do** and finally take responsibility for what they **will do**.

Recommendation

Individually taking responsibility for your language doesn’t have to cost a lot of money and will greatly improve your effectiveness. The Waste Management Program will benefit immeasurably from creating an intention and the strategy for **implementing a culture of improving the consciousness and the effectiveness of language.**

The Center for Creative Living, out of Milwaukee (414.332.3656) <http://www.lightly.com>) provides excellent classes for a host of personal growth skills. They have inexpensive (\$15) classes including, **“Using Your Words Wisely”** and **“When your word becomes law”** among others. I recommend these classes as an offering to interested staff and management members.

Please be conscious that “requiring” or even “expecting” anyone to take such a class will defeat the idea of creating a culture of **taking responsibility for yourself** in matters of becoming a more effective person.

CORE VALUES OF STAFF

I detected a serious level of resentment among staff toward a long litany of Department actions and policies over several years. A good deal of this has to do with the Department’s necessary role as intermediary among and between the wishes of the legislature, the expectations of diverse clients, and the core values of staff.

As much as a three-fold request is made of any staff person who is asked to support/regulate/monitor the activities of clients based on changing policies:

A) A staff person may be asked to substantially change the parameters within which she or he uses personal judgment to do work. The request/order to change anything at all puts extra demands on the staff member in terms of time, uncertainty of outcome, possible new training or research and other such requirements.

B) Often this change of parameters can further require the staff member to lose the sense of linear clarity about what is being done and why it is being done. This is especially true when staff is not involved in helping to design and set new policies and procedures. Such changes are often disorienting and confusing.

C) Often these changes also challenge the staff member's very sense of core values. I think it's fair to say that most people who come to work at DNR as scientists come because they see it as an opportunity to fulfill themselves by working in an institution that has responsibility for managing the stewardship of the environment. This is something a staff person may feel very passionate about. When a staff member is asked to shift his or her activity or approach in a way that feels compromising of their core values the level of anxiety is very deep.

From what I can tell there is little, if any, effort put into honoring those core values or working with understanding the paradoxes that are set up when those values are challenged.

This is not an easy area to work on. And, if it isn't worked on to understand it better and handle it more skillfully, it will (and has) ultimately demoralize the staff draining energy, productivity, and creativity.

TRUST

The desire for a greater level of trust is a major theme that runs throughout the Focus Group discussions, both staff and managers. It is found in the "Hopes and Wishes" processes, as well as in the venting, the questions, the check-ins and the check-outs.

Following are some sub-themes relevant to the matter of Trust:

- Collaboration
- Professionalism
- Parity with externals
- Staff input with predetermined outcomes
- Timelines/Boundaries/Usefulness
- Trust
- Open and Honest Communication
- Accountability

- Leadership
- Public Involvement
- Better Management
- Openness / Transparency
- Fair and Objective Process
- The Right People
- Better Relationships
- Staff Input

These themes constitute various emotions that came up in the focus groups, Hopes and Wishes for a vital and healthy program as well as in the venting of anger, frustration, doubt.

There is an adage in business that ‘it is more important to **work on your business** than to work in your business.’

I suggest that the Waste Management Program Managers and **Staff start working ON trust.**

That means, **learn how trust is built... as a generic subject.** Start practicing the known elements of trust in small ways. Whenever you are engaged in issues of the program **ask yourself, ‘How am I contributing to building trust here?’**

The Waste Management Program cannot hope to bring forth a truly successful re-design program, without directly addressing the subject of trust.

Recommendation: Invest in providing administrators, managers, and staff with opportunities for seminars, coaching, and follow-through on the techniques of improving trust within the program. Trust will improve as it is demonstrated by dignity, respect and kept promises.

The Center for Creative Learning in Milwaukee (414.332.3656) <http://www.lightly.com>) offers a course called, “**Ethics: What do You do When No One is Looking?**” and has a process called “**The Ethical Type Indicator.**” Learning more about the mechanics of ethics will help enormously in establishing a better environment for trust.

DISONANCE

In the external client, internal staff, and administrative matrix

The dissonance within the external client, internal staff, and administrative matrix creates a strong undercurrent of angst that serves to negatively influence everything else you are striving to do. This angst is very evident in the check-in rounds with staff, in particular, expressing a substantial feeling of futility and skepticism as they entered into the focus group discussion.

It seems that there is a lot of alienation experienced on the part of staff in particular as they stand, without the necessary self-preservation tools, amidst the paradoxes, perils and opportunities of this dynamic matrix.

Recommendation: Program leadership (with all interested parties represented at the table) will do well to research, create, and implement 'best practices' in the area of managing this matrix.

STAFF FOCUS GROUPS – OVERVIEW

All waste staff were invited to participate in one of three focus group sessions. One of the three sessions was held specifically for management, so that line staff would feel able to express themselves freely. Details from these sessions are provided in separate sections of this report; important themes which emerged from these sessions are reported here.

REVIEW OF REPORT FROM EXTERNAL FOCUS GROUP INPUT

The July 7th staff group of about 12 people did a thorough review of the report we had from the external group. The process included indicating levels of comfort with elements of the report by using different sticky dots colors in a multi-voting process. Green dots represented "basic agreement", yellow dots represented "need clarification, and red dots represented "basic disagreement". The entire exercise is available in the July 7th section of the full report.

The Themes that the 7/7 Staff Focus Group identified and prioritized in the External Group Report are:

- Professionalism
- Communication
- Change
- Industry Operations
- Regulation
- Innovation
- Technology
- Costs
- Collaboration
- Service
- Coordination

This exercise is particularly instructive because it indicates the areas where the staff saw **agreement** with the external group as well as their desire for **more clarity** on particular items and their **disagreement**. There was more agreement than disagreement. This is something that can be built on.

I will address just a couple of items:

Professionalism

A distillation of the group's collective thinking about the report indicates a *high degree of agreement (31 Green Dots) on the part of the internal staff with the external participants' ideas regarding "Professionalism" in the program.*

This desire for professionalism constitutes a very positive theme around which to build more trust and respect.

A close reading of the items that constitute the professionalism theme indicate a sense that while we desire professionalism we do not fully enjoy it now. We have work to do such as, training, mentoring, improving technical skill, predictability and timeliness and more.

Very importantly the use of **the word "professional" often works as a weapon** to judge, stifle, or ostracize, as when someone says, "that's not professional" when, "I don't approve" is what is meant.

It is important to foster an environment in which the definitions of professionalism are jointly developed and avoiding things such as "codes of professionalism" that are imposed.

Communication, Collaboration, Cooperation

While these three themes were identified separately I have combined them as **the three C's on which the success of any program rests** to a considerable degree. Together they totaled 25 green dots. Yet another area in which the staff and the externals might find a lot of agreement.

Working to build on areas of agreement will generate positive energy for a better mind-set when you work on areas of disagreement or conflict.

Change

Change is at the top of the list in both the Yellow (desire for clarification) and Red (basic disagreement) and third in the Green column (basic agreement) for a total of 33 dots across the spectrum.

I have addressed the subject of change in the introduction to this summary. Its importance is underscored here. Any change process will have more success with a thorough **examination of the mechanics of change processes and dynamics at the front end** of such an initiative.

HOPES AND WISHES

**for a Healthy and Vital Redesign Process and Product
Staff (7/7 and 7/15)**

From the two Staff Focus Groups the following major themes emerged:

- Management
- Staff
- Trust
- Process
- The Environment

We established priorities for achieving a healthy and vital redesign process and product.

The list headings that share the **Management** affinity are:

- (Better) Management
- The Right People (in the right position)
- (Stronger) Management
- (Revised) Structure
- Leadership
- Reduce Management Numbers
- Technical Expertise (among managers)

The list headings that share the **Staff** affinity are:

- Effective Staffing Resources
- Staff Development
- Maintain and Improve Technical Expertise
- Designate Program Experts

The list headings that share the **Trust** affinity are:

- Accountability
- Openness/Transparency/ Cooperation – Trust
- Better Relationships
- Respect.

The list headings that share the **Process** affinity are:

- Response to External Concerns
- Fair and Objective Process for Redesign
- Effective Communication
- Public Involvement
- Re-examine the past

The list headings that share the **Environment** affinity are:

- Stewardship / Protect Environment and Individuals

- Environmental Protection

HOPES AND WISHES

For a Healthy and Vital Redesign Process and Product (Management 7/14)

From this Management Focus Group the major themes that emerged are:

- Organizational Efficiency
- Trust
- Participation/Collaboration/ Open Communication
- Relationships.

HOPES AND WISHES

for a Healthy and Vital Process in Dealing with the Wounds of the Past [Staff (7/7 only)]

From this Staff Focus Group the major themes that emerged are:

- Open and Honest Communication
- Staff Input
- Fair and Equal Stakeholder Input.

QUESTIONS/RESPONSES

[Staff (7/7 and 7/15)]

For the 7/7 session the questions only (a rather lengthy list) were captured and the facilitator organized them into themes for the full report.

In the 7/15 session the group's initial questions were just a few in number. Commentary and response to those questions by the management representative elicited a fairly lengthy list of responses that were captured and the facilitator organized those follow-up questions and comments into themes for the full report .

Below I have distilled these two, somewhat different, sets of information.

The major themes that emerged are:

For 7/7 Session

- A) Timelines/Boundaries/Usefulness
- B) Parity with Externals
- C) Staff Input and (the perception of)
Predetermined Outcomes
- D) Clarity
- .

For 7/15 Session

- A) Lack of Believability
- B) Lack of Trust
- C) External Pressure
- D) Citizen Representation
- E) Integrity of the process
- F) Management/Technical Staff

